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# THE ACTUAL STATE OF ART AMONG US.\*

BY EDWIN HOWLAND BLASHFIELD.

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SOME of us here looking backward can remember quite well the output of American Artists fifty years ago, the art galleries and museums of what Mr. Henry James called mediæval New York. In those days long open sleighs plied as winter 'buses on Broadway. The snow was banked in a wall down the centre of the thoroughfare, for there were no "white-wings" to carry it away, and up-going and down-going people caught sight of each other only as they passed the side streets. The pictorial art which was most in evidence between the Battery and Grace Church—an art most dear to my childish heart—was that which presented, upon oval panels, giraffes, ostriches, elephants, and all the rest, on the front of Barnum's Museum, big and imposing for its time, upon the site of the present Saint Paul Building. For real art one went away up-town, nearly to Union Square, to Williams & Stevens, or to the pictures in the Düsseldorf gallery, or, while the great exhibition lasted, one fared on to the terminus of 'bus lines, the jumping-off place of Forty-second Street, and the Crystal Palace, where one might visit that cynosure and sensation, the bronze Amazon and Tiger. In those days we strained our eyes across seas toward the promised land, the streets of Düsseldorf and Antwerp, the ateliers of the Latin Quarter, the studios of the Via Margutta. As late as the spring of 1867, William Morris Hunt said to one very young student,—“Go straight to Paris; anything which you learn here you will have to unlearn.”

We have changed all that. We have parted with the Italian image-vender's tray, borne upon his head down area steps of brownstone houses, to the negotiation for a plaster woolly lamb

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or a "Little Samuel Woke," have exchanged it for Barbediennes bronzes. We are up to date and the Undines and Kobolds of Düsseldorfers of half a century ago have become the Manets and Monets of to-day; indeed, with some people, Manet is already *démodé*. Our change of heart was first effected along the lines of the least resistance, the sleek porcelain sheep of Verboeckoven were received into our fold before we could tolerate the shaggy real ones of later artists; the little wax maidens of Meyer von Bremen grew in our collections only very gradually into the flesh and blood ones of French canvases. We imported much sculpture, which now seems to all of us less fit for the auctioneer's hammer than for the road-mender's. We grew perhaps by fits and starts, but we *did* grow, and at last swiftly and mightily. William Morris Hunt was wise as well as great in his own generation, when one had "to unlearn American art teaching," but no one would glory more than he, in the fact that to-day our young people may learn in America, as well as in any schools in the world, the spelling and grammar of their art, and may stand as firmly and squarely here upon their technique as ever they could in the streets of Paris. Our landscape school may take its place beside any, and as for portrait-painting, there is an American in London to-day whom Frans Hals, could he come back to us, would call brother, standing shoulder to shoulder with him. And *yet!* though achievement is ours, though momentum has been attained and well directed, though our public is prodigal of purse and praise, *your* fingers, gentlemen, the fingers of the practitioners of that wider art which includes literature and music, are almost as much needed upon the pulse of that same public as they were in the days of mediæval New York aforesaid.

We buy enormously, we praise much, but we also neglect much; we love perhaps not too well, but surely at times not too wisely. We have worn out many fashions in admiration, and in wearing them out we have learned from each, but we have not yet learned steadiness of purpose, or quite acquired the fair-mindedness which should be sheet-anchor to the omnivorous collector we seem destined to become among nations. It is likely that we tire only temporarily of the really good, but we tire often. For a few seasons we will have in music only gods and giants, dragons and swan maidens. Then all at once "La Traviata" or "Lucia" pushes

"Brünnhilde" out of the saddle, and "Madame Butterfly" sings "Elsa" off the boards. We have gone into and out of phases that may almost be labelled Barbizon School phase; Munich phase of bitumen; Monet phase, of blue shadows; worsted sampler phase of little vibrant streaks of color; Carriere phase, where the house is always on fire, and the family group poses peacefully in a room filling with smoke. In each of these phases is beauty, in some marvellous beauty, but do we not go through them too completely and then abandon them too utterly?

Names have become potent to conjure with, and are growing greater and greater. Hoppners, Romneys, Reynolds, and wonderful to tell Vandykes, Hals, even Rembrandts are almost pouring into the country; fifty years ago so many aeroplanes from the Continent would have hardly seemed more unlikely visitors than these pictures, darlings of collectors in old castles and manors, and coveted by the museums of all Europe.

For in our enthusiasm and our art growth we have waxed so fat and kicked so mightily that we have kicked out the timbers of the dam of protection, so that the frightened amateurs of England and the Continent, who fifty years ago could look down upon us from the height of justified patronage, are proclaiming their apprehension through their press in shrill prophetic cries. Our opportunity, thanks to our great collectors, is indeed splendid, invaluable, and yet the very greatness of it should breed caution.

It is when the magician conjures with his most fascinating material that we most easily forget to watch his sleeves; when he says Rembrandt, how Eckhout and Bol and Flick drop out of our remembrance. And when the scrap surely is by the great man how large it looms to us in comparison with the size which it would have assumed for his contemporaries, above all for him. You say that is right, any scraps by certain men are priceless.

Granted, but such men are *very* rare; the personalities which were so divine as to hallow all which came from them are almost more than rare. One may even discount Homer's nodding, to the extent of admitting *that*. Great men do much work which they reject, then comes, let us say, Corot's model (for Corot was a notable example as giver). "I found this sketch behind the coal-box, M. Corot, covered with dirt. May I have it?" "Yes, my child," and so later the public, like the model, begs for it and obtains it, but not, like the model, at the price of a thank you.

It would probably not be possible to-day for a Homer Martin to watch his canvases selling for twenty-five dollars at an auction, those canvases which now bring thousands; a Millet could not long remain undiscovered, because discovery has grown to mean fortune, and we have cultivated the eyes of lynxes and the noses of hunting-dogs. But we mistake and exaggerate, nevertheless, and often in the direction most opposed to what one would expect. We not only worship the atelier rubbish of the dead artist, we cultivate the idiosyncrasies and mannerisms of the live artist. "But don't you think, Mr. Blashfield," said a lady artist to me, "that Puvis de Chavannes would be much less interesting if he drew better?" I understood her, and knew that she did not mean what she said, but her opinion so enounced could hardly have been useful to pupils. It is just such people as worship the limitations before the potentialities, who wear blinders, and are only held up by the shafts, the shafts of the admiration of the moment, who pave the way for straying in the wrong direction and make the lay public forget those who follow the right road. For such people the accident is the essential, the normal is negligible, and nothing but caviare is worth eating; if they could see a play on a house roof, or in a cellar, they would value it far more highly than in a theatre, they tilt head down at any one who makes a rule and keeps it, and they call all that is not amorphous academic. It is their outcry which imposes upon the great general indifferent public, and which occasionally, when a question of genuine expediency arises, does real harm; to this little group straining for the exotic, it seemed not unreasonable that a dozen cities should surpass New York utterly in provision for exhibitions, and that the current work of the greatest of American producers, New York, should remain unhoused, made it possible even for a daily paper to say the artists are negligible since they have neither money nor political influence. This was in reference to their request for a grant of public land, but can any one imagine such a statement being made about the artists in any European city big or little?

To these people again any Academy, *qua* Academy, is objectionable. They admire eccentricity,—not as a manifestation of possibilities, but just as eccentricity, and to them is coming some day regret for their inculcation of technique as end, not means, and far worse their limitation of technique to manipulation of

pigment. To cry out against labored canvases, to put on paint in a dashing manner, and cry live Frans Hals and vitality is fine certainly, but it must not be forgotten that the strength of Hals and his vitality, his viability as artist, lie not in the width of his brush strokes, but in the fact that his broad strokes are of the right size and shape and value, and put in exactly the right place.

Yet in spite of exaggerations and what, though it seem almost perversity, we must admit to be sincere if mistaken, the great trend of our art is toward sanity, and a sanity which is become yearly less and less a derivation, more and more an American product.

For the last fifteen years especially we have been moving forward with astonishing swiftness over the field of Art, and as we moved we have to a considerable extent surveyed and levelled and cleared the ground, but there are still unexpected holes in which we trip, quagmires in which we flounder, unsuspected chasms like the sunken road at Waterloo, into which our cavalry charge of enthusiasm tumbles pell-mell, checking all advance till the latter again becomes possible over the bridge of thwarted endeavor made by the bodies of the fallen. All this we expect; decimation and more than decimation of our combatants we must discount, but you can help us. You, the Academy, can be like that marvellous general staff of the German Army; you may not fight the battle of the allied arts yourselves, but you may make it possible for us, the active army, to fight successfully. I am told by those who have travelled in America that the awakening of interest in what we call the arts is almost incredible throughout the length and breadth of the Union. There are exhibitions, permanent and recurrent and ambulant. There are societies for the encouragement of municipal art, of decorative art, of applied art. Senator Newlands has told us that in tiny towns of Nevada and Montana, musical societies work single-heartedly and effectively toward a higher level of culture; all over the country, boys leave the plough for the palette. To the door of my own studio in the Carnegie Building comes a steady stream of young fellows who want to be my assistants for a small salary,—in many cases for no remuneration at all save the instruction to be derived. Blue-aproned girls caked with paint and clay and fired with enthusiasm flock from the schools of the little cities to the schools of the big ones and pass onward overseas until they tell me that in Paris

the word "art student" has come to mean American girl. This condition is phenomenal; it is going to be alarming if not rightly handled, and to so handle it is our business, and in a wider and higher sense, *your* business, gentlemen of the Academy. The Mill that in the northern story, at the bottom of the ocean, grinds out the salt that savors all the seas, is hardly more active than are our schools in the production of boys and girls in possession of a fair technique. We have high ideals, and with admirable, and I fully believe justifiable, courage, our infant industry asks *not* to be protected, and lets down the bars to foreign art of all kinds. In the welter which is sure for some time at least to follow this wave of enthusiasm, this stream of production from east to west, what need there is of a tribunal such as yours, gentlemen, what need of an arbiter (by no means always elegantiarum)? And you *are* an arbiter which the great universal client called the Public will respect; you are the gods of the machine, the men from higher up, from our Parnassus. In you, that many-headed client has, relatively, confidence; true, you do not in every case rise to the altitude of being first of all business men, but you are scholars, writers; you are thinkers, not unpractical dreamers, and there has not yet been imputed to you as the necessary conditions of greatness, even of genuineness, that you shall never keep your appointments or pay your bills.

Therefore, in the ever-recurring discussion between the Great Public and the great body of artists, if you will throw your authority into the scales for *us*, it shall be as the sword of Brennus to weigh, as the sword of Alexander to cut the Gordian tangle of our difficulties.

And *we* are trained to understand and help each other, so strong are the analogies between our arts. As every French soldier had in his knapsack the possible baton of a Marshal, so every one of us has among his professional tools the potential pass-key to the adytum, the inner sanctuary of the other arts. Among us each man's mystery, as they said in the Middle Ages, may become so clear to his fellows that we all may join hands.

Our Academy and Institute, made up of men who rub against the issues of the day, yet live a kind of cloistered mental life of their own, given to the pursuit of knowledge and the attempt to create beautiful, has more than once reminded me of an excursion which I once made to the great monastery of Monte

Oliveto Maggiore, sixteen miles above Siena, in the hills. It is nearly empty now, but once it was a microcosm in its activities. There the brothers, the thinkers and writers and recorders of the time, shut up in church and cloister and scriptorium opened their outbuildings to the world, and there, especially upon certain fixed days of festival or council, of papal or imperial progress, the *world* was harbored in the vast courtyard. The latter was a caravansary, where provinces were pigeonholed. The names are still upon the pigeonholes, big bare echoing vaulted rooms with yards for the beasts. Here you read over the entrance, Lombardy, here Tuscany, there and there Genoa, Venice, Romagna. Here the laymen paused for a day from their business and listened to the teaching of those who thought and planned.

And note—and here is my point towards which we have journeyed among the Tuscan hills—note that this was neutral ground, the territory not only of the church, but of the arts.

Perhaps while the monastery courtyard held these people safe and quiet, outside there was fighting; very likely while Lombards and Venetians were cooking their meals or foddering their beasts with only a party wall between them, Lombardy and Venetia were cutting each other's throats. But with the quarrelsome laymen there entered one group of people who were not quarrelsome, and whose names were entered upon the lists of the major crafts. They were the artists, the architects, sculptors, painters, sure of a warm welcome from their tonsured hosts who were artists also, poets, musicians, historians, calligraphers, illuminators.

And the power of these artists went afield; if within the monastery was the truce of God, the artist as far as his personal security went, carried the truce of God *with* him. Through the fourteenth century, Italy was a battle-field, but Giotto and his painters, Giovanni Pisano and his sculptors, Arnolfe and his architects, went up and down the battle-field unharmed, and entered through the breached walls of cities to paint allegorical pictures of the blessings of Peace in the Town Halls.

And these artists were a little band of men, knit together as we *should* be now, by the closest bonds of interdependence and mutual comprehension. They understood each other's specialties, and in the days when Dante tried to draw an angel, or later when Raphael scrawled rhymes for sonnets on the backs of his studies, the artist was ambidexterous, holding the chisel in one hand, the



brush in the other, and taking up now and again lute or pen or compass.

The world calls artists jealous (I use the word "artists" in its largest sense), but a better freemasonry has existed among us for eighteen hundred years than anywhere else outside the church, and our freemasonry dates from before Christianity. To-day is like yesterday; war, commercial war, is bitter all about us. We are neutral, and if the ideal enlightened layman needs a breathing-spell he interests himself in helping a museum or backing the improvement of a city's topographical ordering. He joins hands with us for *our* good and *his* good, and everybody's good, and yet—we speak a language of our own—and there are times when we belong together, and only together. We need the contact of the world too, that is certain, and if, like the monks aforesaid, we each of us withdraw into our individual cell during the period of meditation, later we must (like them again) work altogether in the monastery garden's sunshine for our mental health. I do not mean that we should confuse our works, but that they should proceed *pari passu* under the general mutual stimulating influence. A picture does not look better because it is called a Nocturne, nor does a musical movement seem more lovely, to me at least, because it is called a Study in some color or other. There are people who tell me that names mean colors to them; that Lucy is pink, and Mary blue, and Jane brown, and so on. I am not subtle enough for that. But we *do* have our signs that pass current among us only. We have much to say to each other that we are not ready to say to other men until our work is complete and fit for presentation. When Babel was building and the confusion of tongues came upon man, two languages remained common to all—the language of the emotions and *our language*—that of the arts. This latter tongue spoken intimately among ourselves is understood broadly by all. By reason of this latter possession, we, the writers, musicians, architects, sculptors, painters, if but struck aright, sound in the great symphony of the world's activities as one harmonious chord. By reason of it the artist is a citizen of the world, at home *urbi et orbi*.

EDWIN HOWLAND BLASHFIELD.